

SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE



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Vol. VIII

APRIL, 1925

No. 5

BULLETIN

Sweet Briar College

SWEET BRIAR, VIRGINIA



Honor Dinner, February 19, 1925

Published by Sweet Briar Institute

NOVEMBER—JANUARY—APRIL—JUNE

Entered as second-class matter at the post-office, Sweet Briar, Virginia

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An Undergraduate's View of the Function of a College

Those of us who are nearing that long-visioned goal, a bachelor's degree, have begun to try to take stock of ourselves and make some attempt to define the value of our college education. Most of us have come here—we may as well be frank and admit it—just because a college education is the usual thing to do, the accepted thing, one might even say the fashionable thing. We have come without any definite ambition, without even a very concrete conception of what a college is for. We knew that there were certain courses to be taken, courses that sounded very learned and very technical even to our sophisticated high school ears. We also knew that one lived in dormitories, a new and fascinating prospect. Beyond that, our ideas were vague.

But gradually during our years here, we have come to realize that there must be some definite function for a college, and we seek some kind of an answer to the questions that force themselves upon us. What have we accomplished? What have we gained that we would otherwise lack? What are we that we would not otherwise be? In a word, what has our college education done for us?

Of late years there has been a comparatively swift change in the conditions of college life, and a corresponding change in the educators' idea of the function of a college. The strictly classical required course has given place to a partly classical, partly scientific course, with considerable freedom left the student in his choice. The growing popularity of the American college, together with other contributing causes, combined to bring about the changed curriculum, under the sponsorship of Charles William Eliot of Harvard. Instead of being a haven for the student and scholar, the college has become the training ground for American upper and middle class youth. The candidates for A.B. degrees are no longer just those who desire to use their college training professionally as teachers, scholars, or writers. They are a vast concourse who are taking a college

education as preliminary training to all kinds and conditions of business, social, and professional life.

Out of this growth and change there came a gradual conflict of ideas which divided the educational world roughly into two opposing camps: (1) The exponents of the purely intellectual, cultural idea, and (2) The exponents of the vocational, utilitarian idea.

On one side are arrayed those who believe that the sole, all-excluding purpose of the college is intellectual discipline and culture. For them all activities outside the academic work detract rather than aid. In the main, those who hold this view are scholars of the old school, to whom the four years of undergraduate college work furnish only an introduction to true scholarship. The prime and only business of the college student is to learn to think, systematically, logically, and quickly; to make of his mind a ready, inquiring, and receptive agent. The pursuit rather than the acquisition of knowledge is the end. To enjoy this pursuit is the criterion of a true scholar. Woodrow Wilson, while President of Princeton, expressed in a Phi Beta Kappa address this conception of the function of the higher education. He said: "The whole fault of the modern age is that it applies to everything a false standard of efficiency. . . . The life of this country is going to be revolutionized and purified only when the universities of the country wake up to the fact that their only reason for existing is the intellect." Surely this is a high and noble conception. And yet—

Well, let us consider the opposing camp before we draw our conclusions. Arrayed against those who believe in the purely intellectual purpose of the college are those who maintain that the training given should be of practical value in life outside. Those who expound this view most loudly are the men of business, the laymen of the educational world. Yet there are educators who believe in it, witness the great schools of technology, and the changes in the college of liberal arts itself. The cry for practical utility is loud and potent in these "efficiency" days. Why waste valuable years in training that has no value in dollars and cents, and turn out young people who must get all their practical training through experience? Why cannot mental train-

ing and culture be acquired in subjects that may later be put to practical use as in subjects that are purely classical or purely theoretical? Why not prepare the young men and women in college today to earn their livings in the best, the easiest, and the quickest way? Why shut them away in protected isolation for four years and then push them headlong into a world they have not been taught to meet?

This feeling has permeated deep into the educational theories of today. Indeed Doctor Meikeljohn, formerly President of Amherst College, goes so far as to say in his book, "The Liberal College," that education is socially justifiable only if it prepares the students to do better manufacturing, better distributing, and better using. This expression, while not advocating a technically vocational college training, certainly places education on a frankly utilitarian basis, far from that on which Woodrow Wilson places it. The student is considered as a potential economic unit, not even as a social or political unit.

The intellectual and utilitarian views seem far apart and well-nigh irreconcilable; yet a compromise, or rather a harmony between the two has gradually worked itself out in practice, while the professional educators still debate the question in controversy. That the individual's intellectual development is a worthy end in itself, is certainly a tenable position. That the individual is a unit in the social, political, and economic orders is also a justifiable position. That the individual, to realize himself fully, must take an active part in these accepted orders is almost axiomatic. Why then, should it not be the function of the college, as the accepted mode of education, to prepare the individual, not only for the enjoyment of purely academic intellectual pursuits, but also for social, economic, and political pursuits?

Education is not merely formal instruction in the classroom. It is the fostering of all latent qualities that are socially desirable, bringing them out into the full light of day, shaping and polishing them. Education is, in its highest conception, the making of a complete person. I use the word person rather than individual here, because an individual is isolated, a person is a being with social contacts. During the past twenty years the conception of the truly intellectual life has gone back from the notion

of individually sufficient thought to the much older conception of the necessity of the "dialectic interplay of a plurality of minds," as the late Professor Creighton expressed it. Surely the intellectual side of the student is not only the only side worthy of development. Nor does it seem feasible that all the development of his other capabilities should take place either before or after the college course. As a matter of fact, the other sides are going to develop during the college years, whether or no, and it is the part of wisdom for the college to offer opportunity and encouragement for their development in harmony with the intellectual development.

This statement does not by any means imply that the intellectual life of the student should not be the first interest of the college, only that the opportunity should be offered, and freely, for the growth of the other sides that must come into play after college. President Chase, of the University of North Carolina, says in an article in the "New Republic" supplement: "The liberal arts college must abandon, not its function of imparting learning which has no direct vocational motive, . . . but its timidity and irresolution as an interpreter of the complex life of the world today." The accepted media of interpretation are the strictly academic life, and the student life. It is difficult to speak highly of the value of the so-called student activities without seeming to undervalue the academic side, because of the antithesis that is presupposed to exist between the two. But may we not assume, on the basis of the experience of the majority of the smaller colleges, that student activities do not mean a lowering of the academic standards, but rather their raising, that indeed, the two are mutually dependent and mutually beneficial?

So far we have spoken of colleges in general. Our particular problem is the woman's college, and the place of the college education in a woman's life. As Cicero used to say, we will pass over (only we really will) the question as to whether the intellectual standard for women is, or should be, the same as that for men. The ground is too dangerous there, and though we would be comparatively safe in this company in making almost

any intellectual comparison between men and women, yet we will be chivalrous and refrain.

We are on safer ground when we come to compare the place that a college education as a whole fills in the life of a man with that which it fills in the life of a woman. In spite of the large numbers of women who enter the business world, the pressure of a demand for vocational training for women within the college walls has not come yet. Whatever may be the case in future years, the majority of women do not want or expect vocational training in college today. What they do expect, more or less vaguely, is a preparation for life. Much more universally than in the case of men, the formal education of women terminates with the bachelor's degree. What the woman student has not learned through her college associations she must learn by solving the practical problems of everyday life. It devolves upon the college then, not only to teach her to think, but to offer her opportunities to test her ideals of social responsibility.

The first requisite of learning to live is learning to reflect, to theorize, to think abstractly. This then, is the first function of the college. The second requisite is to test the value of this thinking in practical experience. To offer opportunity for this testing is the second function of the college. Theories must be revised to fit practical conditions before they are valuable. The more truly a student *is* a student, the less will she be satisfied to let her theories rest as she first formulates them, the keener will she be to try them out and revise them. Activity is the truest sign of life. If there is real mental activity, it will take concrete form in efforts at practical application. A keen and healthy mental life in a college will as surely materialize itself in vigorous student activities, as will a healthy colt exercise his legs. The form that the exercise will take, in both cases, depends in part upon the opportunities offered. It depends too, upon the vigor of development and the wisdom of training.

Such student activities will naturally grow up as will make the college community approximate any other normal community. In them experiments will take place in government; in social,

religious, and artistic organizations. There will be mistakes, certainly! There are in every community. But there will gradually evolve a fairly stable order that has proved its worth. In this practical working field, the individual students can test their ideas in competition with the ideas of others. Leadership develops under normal, average conditions, and there grows up the sense of responsibility of citizenship, and of membership in the social order. The more nearly the college community approaches the civil community, the broader is the field in which the student can learn to live.

Sweet Briar is judged, not only by the kind of *thinkers* she sends out, but by the kind of *women* and *citizens* who are her graduates. Our original question was to try to define what we gain in a college education. It is a truism to say that we gain what we give. No reward comes without effort. What each one of us gains is commensurate with what she puts in. But I take it that we are willing to give that we may gain. Gain what? In the words of Professor Thilly of Cornell: "The function of a college is not merely to equip the individual for getting on in life, but to civilize him, to humanize him, to enable him to get his bearing in the social whole, to aid him in forming the right conception of life and in assuming the right attitude to life, to awaken in him a true understanding and appreciation of the moral, social, political, and religious values of his people and the race."

If each of us has gained this, then our question is answered.

ELIZABETH MANNING,

Class of 1925.

Education Beyond Livelihood

If one had to state in a single sentence the underlying meaning and intent of modern education perhaps it might be something like this: modern education is striving to develop a scheme of studies which shall be truly democratic, in the sense that it aims to enable everybody to get the specific training desired. By democratizing and standardizing education, the hope is to offer an opportunity to all and sundry so to unfold their personalities as shall best help them in the practical business of daily living, and daily livelihood, with livelihood first as a consideration. In other words, modern education has increasingly tended to become utilitarian. Once, it was aimed at and formulated for the few: now for the many. Once, the studies, arranged in a curriculum were for culture unrelated to wage; now, they have in view the fact that the majority of those subjecting themselves to the training want results in the pressing business of financial support and must quit all schooling at an age when the humanistic conception of study hardly comes into the reckoning at all. To be sure, even in our public system of education, which most obviously, and of necessity reflects this modern tendency, we still make a distinction between the undergraduate training and the various professional schools that follow. But even here it is perfectly plain that, more and more, professional, vocational training encroaches upon the domain of the general cultural preparation for life, of old regarded as indispensable to a legitimate scheme of education.

The question therefore arises, very pertinent when asked at any time, and especially on an occasion like this, when a good-sized group of girls whose college work has won them honors, has gathered together to celebrate that fact: With our latter-day civilization what it is, and given the revolution in educational ideas which undoubtedly has taken place in our generation, can the cultural studies, the studies not aiming at wage, or specific technical training in some work which is to be taken up as a support in life, be still given a place in the sun among the college

offerings, such as they once did occupy? Can they show cause for their retention and even be made dominant in the educational drill and regimen?

Before trying to answer this vital query, I wish to felicitate myself on one fact, suggested by the dinner. You young ladies are not, I take it, rewarded by inclusion in this favored group merely because you have been diligent enough in your respective studies to get "good marks", however meritorious that may be. No, you are gathered into this group in order to become self-conscious of something that it seems to me is of vast import and importance in any place where the so-called higher education is functioning. I mean, you are here reminded that there *is* such an aim in education, such a conception of it, as admits the idea of learning as an end in itself; that truth can be pursued for its own sake, and that there is no nobler exercise of the human mind than knowledge as a means for rounding out and perfecting character, without the slightest thought of its application to some practical result. Sinclair Lewis's current book, *Arrowsmith*, illustrates what I have in mind: the young physician there, or medical expert, does not allow wealth or social or any other form of worldly success, no, not even the immediate saving from a terrible death of his fellow human beings, to get in the way of his pursuit of scientific truth about disease. So the scholar: he sets up an ideal of the acquirement of knowledge, not primarily to get through college, not to "get by" examinations, but in order to go forth into the world, and take his place in society, prepared to use the privilege of living as a human being, to the widest results of such privilege, for himself and others. He sees that character formation is the true, central aim of an enlightened education. He perceives that humanism is the desideratum in any college culture rightly arranged and realized; the genial possession of the "best that has been thought and said in the world", in Arnold's definition. And while plainly recognizing the practical need, especially in a democracy like America, for vocational training of fifty kinds, he does not allow himself to be confused by any vague mingling of the two ideals; both, for him, have their rights, but always there is harm when they are not kept each in its place.

I believe that a college like Sweet Briar, any such institution having the advantage of being a private foundation, and so not subjected to the utilitarian necessity of being shaped by a more or less ignorant public conception of what education is, has its great chance, first, in thus keeping separate in the mind these two different demands of higher training; and second, in giving the cultural studies their right place as most important to any person viewed not as a lawyer, architect, indoor decorator, nurse, actress, or clergyman, but as just a human being, needing preparation in college for *all* of living beyond livelihood. For there is no surer thing than this: two-thirds of all life is embraced in those hours when, the day's task of whatever kind being done, one must fall back on those wider contacts when the college studies shall have fitted one for a fruitful, enjoyable and helpful intercourse with one's fellows, and for the appreciation of the things of the mind and the spirit; the arts, and letters, travel, joy in Nature, interest in the ups and downs of men and women regarded as psychic marvels. The very studies which may seem useless in college are the studies that best prepare the student for these richer contacts and deeper experiences, later in life. Every year of living will bring this truth home to the individual possibly at present fooled by the over-emphasis upon the practical, vocational, utilitarian in the scholastic drill. Education that is broad, wise, thorough and hence productive of the finest results, must keep this ever in mind, for the sake of all who are being educated. And the students themselves must coöperate by realizing, whatever arguments to the contrary, or however much the trend of education may seem to be in the other direction, how true it is that (educationally this is quite as true as it is spiritually) one may by a false idea of preparation for life win the world at the expense of losing one's soul.

I have a feeling, as I speak here tonight, that I am in a place, surrounded by an atmosphere sympathetic to this cultural conception of education. I believe these are the ideals obtaining in this college. And I regard this dinner group as proof positive of the right attitude and result. You young ladies are about to go out into life, to do many things. It is your privilege, in this day when women have almost limitless opportunity for work and

service, to see yourselves as filling any one of countless rôles. But in one respect you are exactly like the students whom Hypatia addressed, or whom Abelard strove to develop in the nobler realms of thought: you are one and all human beings, made "in the image of God," with soul-needs along with needs physical and mental, and facing the inevitable days when, business over, the work of your home, or trade or profession or calling satisfied for the nonce, you must fall back on the fundamental demands of preparation for living. See to it, while yet you may, that such preparation is furnished you by the wisely regulated scheme of studies and interests that make up the modern curriculum. And knowing Sweet Briar as I do, I have not the slightest doubt that such opportunity has been, will be, offered you here. Education beyond livelihood! More and more, as you live, grow, mature and perceive relative values in life, will that phrase take on a greater significance. Here is the chance: seize it, and so make the most of yourselves, and be able to do most for your fellow mortals, until the earthly opportunity is over.

RICHARD BURTON.



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